

The Highcrest Academy

Hatters Lane, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP13 7NQ

Inspection dates	16–17 March 2016
Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
16 to 19 study programmes	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Requires improvement

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- School leaders, with appropriate support and challenge from governors, have high expectations of all pupils and staff at Highcrest. They have focused relentlessly on improving the quality of teaching and learning, with much success.
- The school has retained a culture in which individual pupils are well cared for and their progress closely monitored. Initiatives, such as the introduction of academic mentors, are helping to raise pupils' aspirations and achievements even further.
- Pupils make good progress in most subjects through all year groups. Standards have risen at the end of Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.
- Disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability receive a range of well-targeted support that helps them to achieve well. Provision for pupils who speak English as an additional language is very effective and ensures that they make rapid progress.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are at least good in most subjects. There is a high level of consistency in the way that teachers plan lessons and provide pupils with feedback. There is a strong and effective focus on improving pupils' literacy skills across all year groups.
- Pupils' personal development and understanding of British values are catered for very effectively through subjects, assemblies and a range of visits, visitors and clubs.
- The quality of provision in the sixth form has improved significantly since the last inspection. It is well led and teaching and outcomes are now good.
- Pupils have a positive attitude to learning and behave well in classrooms and around the school. They say that they feel safe. Safeguarding is managed very effectively by the school's leaders and staff.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Pupils do not make as much progress in modern foreign languages as they do in other subjects in Key Stages 3 and 4.
- Not all subject leaders are as effective as the best.
- Attendance, although improving, is still below the national average.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the progress that pupils make in modern foreign languages by:
 - ensuring that teaching helps pupils to retain their learning more effectively over time
 - improving the accuracy of teachers' assessment of pupils' progress and attainment.

- Ensure that the effectiveness of all subject leaders matches that of the best through closer sharing of good practice in terms of:
 - taking more responsibility for the attainment and progress of individual pupils and groups of pupils in their subjects
 - ensuring greater consistency of teachers' assessment of pupils' progress.

- Seek ways to improve the attendance of the few pupils whose attendance has been persistently below 90%, in order to ensure that attendance overall reaches at least the national average.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is good

- The Principal and her senior leadership team share high expectations for staff and pupils, embodied in the motto 'aspire and achieve'. The leadership team has been strengthened by recent appointments, as acknowledged by comments from several members of staff and parents.
- Leaders' focus on improving teaching has involved regular lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work. It has resulted in a high level of consistency in the way that teachers plan lessons and feedback to pupils. Teachers find the detailed feedback they are given on the quality of their teaching and its impact on pupils' progress very helpful. There is also a comprehensive and innovative programme of training for staff at all levels. Newly qualified teachers and trainees say that they are very well supported.
- The school has received a good level of challenge and support from the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust (BLT). It has commissioned external reviews and received timely advice about strengths and areas for improvement. Governors take advantage of the training programmes that they have bought in from the local authority.
- Pupils are offered a broad range of subjects enhanced by many clubs, educational visits and visitors. A number of Key Stage 4 pupils attend alternative provision for a day each week in order to experience a wider range of vocational opportunities. Leaders regularly review and modify the subjects offered to ensure that they meet pupils' needs. They have introduced the new National Curriculum in Key Stage 3 and an approach to assessment without levels that links Key Stages 3 and 4 expectations. Some subject leaders have identified useful 'I can' statements for pupils in each year group. Most subject leaders have introduced the new assessment system well; pupils understand what their targets are and how to improve.
- The school has a strong and effective focus on improving literacy and promoting reading. Pupils' reading ages are measured on entry to the school and then at regular intervals. There is a range of effective interventions to support those who need to catch up, including reading programmes and handwriting sessions. The library is used regularly in lessons and during lunchtime. Pupils enjoy the reading club and eagerly talk about what they are reading and how much progress they have made. Many read accurately and with expression.
- The school provides a number of different subsidised breakfast clubs, which are well supervised and well attended. They contribute to developing pupils' social skills and self-confidence, as well as providing a healthy start to the day.
- The school is inclusive, and equality of opportunity is made a very high priority. It has a number of external awards linked to inclusion and equality and is a 'rights respecting school' (an award from UNICEF). Leaders work hard to engage parents. They offer family literacy sessions and provide regular information about pupils' progress and events at the school. Most parents are very happy with the way that the school supports their children and with the information they receive. One parent commented on how well the school knows her child's individual strengths and listens to her views.
- Provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is a strength. It is carefully planned for in subjects, assemblies, tutor periods, visits and visitors. Good practice is shared through training for staff. Pupils take part in community events and regularly raise money for charities. They are taught about different religions and cultures and they have an ongoing link with schools in India. Pupils are taught about British values and they say that there is zero tolerance of homophobic or racist comments. The courteous relationships between pupils reflect the school's culture of tolerance and respect. Pupils experience visits to theatres, museums and exhibitions and are encouraged to enter poetry and creative writing competitions. Pupils enjoy opportunities to take responsibility and to take part in democratic processes such as voting for the school council. Some pupils have also participated in mock trials, acting as 'magistrates', and they visited Aylesbury Crown Court to observe a real trial in action.
- The school provides very well for pupils who speak English as an additional language, which ensures that they make rapid progress throughout the school. These pupils receive additional help as soon as they start, based on their stage of learning English. Pupils who need it are given support in reading during tutor times. All staff have received training in how best to teach pupils who speak English as an additional language. Highcrest's work in this area has been used by the local authority as a model of good practice to support other local schools.
- The school makes effective use of additional funds such as the pupil premium and funds to enable pupils to catch up in literacy and numeracy. A range of strategies have been used to raise the standards of

disadvantaged pupils and close the gap in school and nationally. For example, funds have paid for the appointment of staff who work closely with disadvantaged pupils in class and in small groups to ensure that they make rapid progress. Pupils are given extra help from subject teachers in sessions before and after school and in revision centres during the holidays. They are provided with resources such as books and access to subject software, and help with purchasing uniforms. School leaders have evaluated the impact of the various initiatives and modified the programmes where necessary.

- Pupils receive good-quality advice about careers and are well prepared for the next stage of their education and for life outside of school. Sixth formers are given help in preparing for university life expectations and how to work more independently, for example. Pupils appreciate the role of the academic mentors in helping them to set and meet their targets and to plan their revision.
- Most subject leaders are effective in leading improvements in teaching and learning in their areas. They keep a close track of pupils' attainment and progress and ensure that teachers in their departments are implementing the new policy on assessment without levels well. There are a few subject leaders who are less effective. They are not taking full responsibility for tracking pupils' progress and are over-reliant on information from senior leaders. They are not ensuring that their department has adopted a consistent approach to assessment without levels.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Governors responded swiftly to concerns raised at the last inspection. They commissioned an external review and have acted on its recommendations. They undertake regular training to keep up to date with developments, such as in safeguarding.
 - Governors are passionate about the school and are ambitious for its continued improvement. They are knowledgeable about its strengths and weaknesses, including the quality of teaching. They ensure that staff members' performance is managed well and that movement up the pay scale is appropriately linked to the quality of teaching.
 - Oversight of spending is managed well by governors. For example, there is a named 'pupil premium' governor who has regular meetings with senior leaders and is monitoring the use of the funds to ensure they are having a positive impact.
 - Governors provide a good level of challenge to leaders and hold them to account. They ask probing questions and commission external reviews, such as of target setting. They receive reports and presentations from all subject leaders, which enable them to ask searching questions.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. All aspects of safeguarding are given a high priority and managed very well. There are clear systems that are known by staff and pupils. As a result, pupils feel safe and secure and most parents agree. Staff have received all the necessary training and this is repeated for teachers new to the school each term. Pupils have also been involved in delivering presentations on internet safety and radicalisation to fellow pupils and staff.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment **is good**

- Teaching is at least good in most subjects and across all key stages. The majority of parents who responded to Parent View believe that their children are taught well.
- There is a high degree of consistency about certain features of teaching such as the way that lessons are planned. Pupils are given a starter activity at the beginning of each lesson to get on with while the register is taken; this ensures an immediate focus on learning. Teachers share learning outcomes with pupils, often at three levels of difficulty. Pupils are encouraged to select their own level using the red/amber/green pages in their planner to indicate their choice. Teachers are alert to those who do not push themselves. This approach enables the most-able pupils to progress more quickly.
- Relationships are a strength and contribute to a purposeful academic atmosphere in lessons. Pupils respond enthusiastically to activities and settle quickly to work. They cooperate well and help each other.
- Teachers use questioning effectively to encourage pupils to think hard and to explain their reasoning. There is a consistent focus on improving pupils' literacy skills by the use of subject-specific key words. Pupils are expected to answer in full sentences using accurate technical language. By directing questions at individuals, teachers tailor the challenge of the questions to pupils' abilities.
- Teachers' subject knowledge is secure. They are confident and enthusiastic about what they are teaching; this is appreciated by pupils. They often present work in interesting ways that will appeal to boys and girls. They are good role models for pupils.
- Teachers assess pupils' progress effectively in most subjects, both in lessons and in written work. The

school's policy for marking and feedback is applied well by the majority of teachers. Pupils understand the system and know how to improve.

- Less-able pupils and those who have special educational needs or disability are taught well and make good progress. They are often taught in smaller groups where they are given more individual attention by the teacher or learning support assistant. Expectations of them are still high and the work is challenging. For example, pupils with special educational needs were tackling demanding questions on statistics in a Year 9 class and succeeding, with effective help from peers and their teacher.
- A range of appropriate homework is set regularly and recorded in pupils' planners or on the website. Pupils say that they find homework useful. A few parents indicated that they would like their children to be given more homework.
- Pupils make less progress in modern foreign languages than in most other subjects. Although they take pride in their work and participate well, the teaching does not help them to retain their knowledge sufficiently. Consequently, they often fail to achieve well in tests. The feedback they receive in terms of grades is sometimes misleading as it is overgenerous.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare is good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development is good.
- Pupils' pastoral care, including their physical and emotional well-being, is a high priority for the school. Pupils feel safe and well looked after. They say that the school helps them to be healthy. They indicate that bullying is rare and dealt with swiftly if it does occur; most parents agree. Pupils say that there is a zero-tolerance approach to racism and homophobia. They have received a range of workshops, assemblies and lessons relating to, for example, e-safety, radicalisation, extremism and anti-bullying.
- Pupils spoke about how the school has used mock 'lock downs' to prepare them for any such potential dangers. Staff also spoke about this and how it helped them to feel more secure.
- Pupils receive well-regarded and impartial careers advice and work experience. These help them to be well prepared for the next phase of education or training.
- Most pupils have a positive attitude to lessons and are developing in self-confidence. They respond well to instructions and appear eager to learn. They are not afraid to ask questions in lessons and willingly help their peers who are struggling to understand. They listen politely and attentively when their classmates are reading aloud or answering questions in class.
- The school makes effective use of external agencies to support pupils with particular needs. The school's close monitoring of the pupils who attend the alternative provision ensures that they are making good progress, attending regularly and behaving well.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- They behave well in lessons and around the school. They are clear about the school's expectations and generally respond well. Sanctions, such as the use of detention and the isolation room, are carefully monitored. Exclusions have decreased over the past few years.
- Pupils of all ages are smart and help to keep the school free of litter and graffiti. They are proud of being at Highcrest and most enjoy coming to school.
- Attendance has improved since 2013, though it is still below the national average. School leaders have worked hard to improve attendance using a range of strategies including an attendance officer, first day calls, provision of the breakfast clubs, and rewards for good attendance. Transport has been provided in exceptional cases to ensure that pupils get to school. Despite these initiatives, there are a number of pupils whose attendance persistently falls below 90%; this increased in 2015 and the proportion of pupils with attendance below 90% was higher than the national average.

Outcomes for pupils are good

- The attainment of pupils who join Highcrest in Year 7 is well below the national average in reading, writing and mathematics, reflecting the selection policy in the area. As a result of the banding system that the school introduced in 2013, the proportion of the most-able pupils has increased in Years 7 to 9, but is

still well below the average nationally. Standards have risen in the past few years. The proportion of pupils gaining five GCSEs at A* to C, including English and mathematics, rose sharply in 2015, although it was still below the national average. The school predicts further improvement in GCSE and BTEC results this year.

- Pupils make good progress in most subjects and year groups, as indicated by the school's records and in pupils' work. Progress has been particularly good in English where results have been strong in recent years. The proportion of pupils making and exceeding expected progress from Key Stage 2 to 4 was close to the national average last year. Results in English literature, taken by most pupils, were well above average in terms of the proportion achieving the top grades.
- Pupils make good progress in mathematics. GCSE results dipped in 2015, but are projected to rise this year. The quality of work seen and the school's records support this projection.
- Pupils of minority ethnic backgrounds generally achieve well in most subjects. Those who speak English as an additional language make particularly good progress as a result of the well-targeted support they receive and the school's effective focus on literacy.
- School leaders are well aware of underperformance in some subjects. Their efforts to bring about improvement have been partly successful, although sometimes hampered by difficulties in recruitment of staff.
- The progress of pupils is tracked carefully against expectations based on prior attainment. Those who are underachieving are identified and given additional support.
- Disadvantaged pupils benefit from a wide range of additional support, including from academic mentors who help to ensure that they are on track to achieve well. The attainment and progress gaps with others nationally and in school reduced in 2015 in English. The gap reduced in mathematics with others nationally but not in school. The average GCSE point score in-school gap was around a half a grade last year. School leaders accept that the gap is still too wide and are striving to close it further. The projections for this year indicate a continuing reduction in the gap.
- The most-able pupils make good progress in most subjects. They are identified as soon as they join the school and their progress tracked closely by academic mentors. Pupils appreciate the 'blue books' they are given where they record further challenges for themselves in all of their subjects. Teachers are aware of the need to ensure that these pupils are given appropriately demanding work in lessons. 'Differentiation' has been a high priority for training and monitoring by senior leaders. In 2015, over one third of GCSEs were graded A*, A or B, which reflected well on an intake of which only 17% are in the category of most-able pupils. The high proportion of A* and A grades in English literature last year also indicates good achievement by the most-able pupils.

16 to 19 study programmes

are good

- Provision and outcomes have improved significantly in the sixth form since the last inspection. Leadership is now strong and has been effective in improving the quality of teaching, which is now at least good in the majority of subjects. Some learners said that 'teachers are passionate about what they teach'.
- Teaching in the sixth form is characterised by respectful relationships and high expectations. Learners are encouraged to think for themselves and to work hard. Teachers have secure subject knowledge and use questioning skills effectively to engage learners and assess their understanding. Teachers check written work and notes regularly and provide feedback using the school's policy. Learners know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. They generally respond to the additional questions that they are given when work is marked.
- Literacy remains a high priority in the sixth form. Learners' reading ages are assessed at the start of Year 12 and those who fall below what is expected are given extra support. Learners who have to retake English and mathematics GCSEs are generally successful.
- Retention into Year 13 has improved, partly as a result of leaders ensuring that there is a better match of learners to courses. Study programmes are carefully designed to meet the needs of individuals. The entry requirements for advanced-level courses have also been raised for some subjects, such as mathematics, where some learners previously struggled and dropped out.
- Learners' progress is closely monitored by the sixth form leader. Learners are given clear targets, and progress is generally good in most subjects. Results in advanced-level and BTEC subjects have improved rapidly. Current advanced-level learners are projected to do even better in 2016. BTEC results have been consistently good, with learners achieving merits or distinctions in most subjects.

- Learners' personal development and welfare are given a high priority. They feel safe. They are encouraged to attend regularly and they compete for trophies for attendance and knowledge of current affairs. Those learners who are new to Highcrest receive an induction programme and they say that they are made to feel welcome. Learners feel well looked after; they said that 'teachers don't give up on you'. They receive good-quality careers guidance and benefit from advice and encouragement that they get from the academic mentors. They have opportunities to attend university taster days and gain work experience. They enjoy the responsibilities they are given, for example as prefects or e-safety ambassadors. They help younger pupils with reading. Sixth formers dress smartly in business attire and present themselves as good role models for their younger peers.

School details

Unique reference number	136858
Local authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	10002399

This inspection was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in 16 to 19 study programmes	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	880
Of which, number on roll in 16 to 19 study programmes	125
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Chris Turner
Principal	Shena Moynihan
Telephone number	01494 529866
Website	http://www.highcrest.bucks.sch.uk
Email address	office@highcrest.bucks.sch.uk
Date of previous inspection	19–20 November 2013

Information about this school

- Highcrest Academy is a smaller-than-average sized secondary school in a local authority that operates selection, with several grammar schools in the local area. The school introduced a banding admissions system in 2013. Pupils are now tested prior to admission, with roughly equal numbers in four ability bands.
- The proportion of pupils supported by the pupil premium is well above average. The pupil premium is additional government funding for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals or who are looked after by the local authority.
- The majority of pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds, the largest group being of Asian British heritage. Forty percent of pupils are from White British backgrounds.
- The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is well above average. A small number are at an early stage of English language acquisition.
- The proportion of pupils who have special educational needs or disability is well above average.
- A number of Key Stage 4 pupils attend alternative vocational provision on Fridays provided by the Blueprint Learning Centre and Aylesbury Youth Motor Project.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress.
- The Principal is a national leader of education.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors observed teaching and learning across all year groups and in most subjects. Many observations were undertaken with senior leaders.
- Inspectors observed tutor periods, an assembly and examples of clubs, including breakfast club.
- Inspectors scrutinised pupils' work during lesson observations and separately. They listened to pupils reading in class and in a meeting where they talked to them about reading habits.
- Inspectors held meetings with three members of the governing body, the Principal, other leaders and managers, a BLT adviser, the lead academic mentor and groups of teachers, and pupils in all key stages.
- Informal discussions took place with pupils during break and lunchtimes.
- The inspectors reviewed a range of documents, including: the school's own evaluation of how well it is doing; its improvement plans; statistical information about pupils' progress and attainment, attendance and exclusions; governors' minutes; and policies, case studies and documents relating to safeguarding and child protection.
- Inspectors considered the 63 responses from parents to the Ofsted online survey and the views expressed in 59 comments and letters and a telephone conversation. They also considered the 37 online responses and 15 paper copies of staff responses to the staff questionnaire. The views expressed in response to the school's own surveys completed by parents were also taken into account.

Inspection team

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